

McCollum Delivers Keynote Address to the Annual Meeting of the Minnesota Transportation Alliance



Rep. McCollum speaks to the Minnesota Transportation Alliance about increasing federal investments in America's vital infrastructure.

Congresswoman Betty McCollum
Remarks before the Minnesota Transportation Alliance
November 10, 2008

I am grateful for the opportunity to talk with you today about transportation.

The Minnesota Transportation Alliance is doing important work in a critical moment for the state and the nation. I would especially like to extend my appreciation to Jim Waffler for the invitation and his counsel over the years. Thank you, Jim.

We all had hoped by this time that the election would be over. Unfortunately, Minnesota loved this year's U.S. Senate race so much we thought we'd drag it out a little longer, maybe if we are really lucky the election will be invalidated and we can start over watch six more months of horrible television commercials.

I am not going to be coy about the other important races. I am thrilled about the election of Barack Obama. I am thrilled about our expanding majority in the U.S. House – right now an 81 seat majority with a few races still undecided.

As far as I am concerned, the time for politics is over and it's now time to get down to the serious business of solving America's problems. The list of problems is long and I think most of us can agree the economy is at the top of a long list. Our financial system is broken and our broader economy is weak. This isn't a minor slowdown – this is a major recession brought on by

deep and widespread economic vulnerabilities.

We will recover, but not overnight and not without strong leadership from Washington. Restoring a path to prosperity for Minnesota families must include a focused, sustained commitment to rebuilding America's transportation infrastructure.

Infrastructure is the obvious place to start – it's the backbone of our economy. And this is exactly the right moment for a comprehensive building program.

It's the right moment because the global economic downturn is reducing the cost of inputs like steel and concrete. That means we'll get more output for every dollar we invest.

It's the right moment because unemployment is climbing fast and infrastructure projects will create good jobs in our communities.

And it's the right moment because we simply can't wait another month, another season, or another year to rebuild our country.

You all know our roads and bridges are in terrible shape. Our infrastructure is literally crumbling.

Earlier this year a twelve-hundred pound chunk of concrete fell from the underside of an I-35E overpass in St. Paul. It smashed two cars traveling below. Thankfully – remarkably – no one was injured, but the incident is inexcusable. This failure occurred almost exactly one year after the collapse of the I-35W Bridge.

In this country, a political philosophy from Washington has resulted in an era of federal neglect. Infrastructure failures, potholes, cracked surfaces, and congestion are all too common, no longer rare exceptions.

How did it get this bad? The federal government walked away from its partnership with state and local government to fund infrastructure. According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the federal share of all infrastructure spending in the country in 1982 was thirty-two percent. By 2004, that commitment had shrunk to less than twenty-four percent.

We've heard a lot about "change" over the past year on the campaign trail. Many people are asking what kind of change should be expected. Expect the federal government to get back into the business of building infrastructure. It's time to end the era of bubble gum with concrete and baling wire with rebar. It is time to re-invest in America's critical infrastructure.

Our first opportunity to get this economy moving again will be an economic stimulus package aimed at creating jobs.

On Friday, President-elect Obama said that signing a large stimulus package will be his first act as President – that is, if Congress doesn't pass a stimulus later this month. I have my doubts about President Bush's willingness to sign a package yet this year.

The stimulus package we take up should be modeled on the one passed by the House in late September. That bill (H.R. 7110) included billions for highways, railroads, transit, clean water, and “green” schools. The House-passed stimulus allocated most of these funds to states and local units of government through existing federal formulas.

One of the big changes was the elimination of all matching requirements – stimulus dollars for infrastructure could come as 100 percent federal funding. The priority for infrastructure investments in the stimulus package will be on projects that are ready to go as soon as 90 days from passage of the bill. Longer-term projects and priorities will be included in next year’s reauthorization of the federal transportation bill.

Chairman Oberstar is pledging to introduce a “transformational bill” that addresses highways, highway safety and public transit. The reauthorization bill must renew the federal government’s commitment to help states and locals responsibly maintain the highways, bridges and tunnels we already have.

We need to encourage innovations in materials and technologies that reduce operating and maintenance costs while improving efficiency. I know the University of Minnesota’s Center for Transportation Studies has some great ideas along these lines. And – where appropriate – we should encourage the private sector to partner with government on transportation.

But a “transformational” reauthorization will do much more. Next year’s bill should write the blueprint for a 21st century transportation system. The core of this blueprint must be an unprecedented federal commitment to public transit. Rail, bus and bike transit-ways will be in this new century what the Interstate Highway System was in the last. These new networks will give our communities choices they don’t have today so they can cut their gas bills, commute times and environmental impact.

Realizing this vision is going to take some big changes.

We need to find ways to build our transit networks smarter and faster – that means abandoning “CEI.” The FTA’s “cost-effectiveness-index” has become a bureaucratic barrier to good, long-term decision-making on the Central Corridor light rail project. Chairman Oberstar said in a public hearing last month that the CEI has to go, and I’m going to help him kick it out the door!

We need to reclaim intermodal transit facilities like the Union Depot in downtown St. Paul that integrate road and rail transportation. And we need to build freight intermodal facilities to enhance our region’s economic competitiveness.

Bringing high speed passenger rail to Minnesota is a top priority for me in reauthorization – and in the appropriation cycles that follow. After a decade of planning, the Midwest High Speed Rail Initiative is close to becoming reality. We are going to connect St. Paul’s Union Depot to downtown Chicago and energize Minnesota’s economy for generations to come.

Deciding what to build will be a challenge. Finding a way to pay for it is the problem.

We know the gas tax hasn't kept up with inflation. And now that people are driving less, the Highway Trust Fund is shrinking fast. The gas tax may need to be augmented with other revenue sources. All funding ideas should be on the table. And the funding debate must be grounded in the reality that nothing worth having is going to be free.

A 21st century transportation system won't be cheap, but it will be worth it. In a globalized world we can't compete without a significantly increased federal commitment to transportation infrastructure.

This country used to set the standard for quality, cutting-edge infrastructure.

That's not true today. The fastest trains and best roads are in Asia and Europe, not America. You get what you pay for – China spends 9 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure; the United States now spends less than 1 percent. Competition isn't just between America and the rest of the world, it's also between Minnesota and every other state, and every other major region in the world.

On Election Day last Tuesday, there were 37 infrastructure related ballot initiatives across America. Almost 80 percent of them passed. California voters approved a nearly \$10 billion bond issue to finance high-speed rail between San Francisco and Los Angeles. The initiative was sold as a way to catch up with global competitors in Asia and Europe who are way ahead in transportation technology.

The Twin Cities is one metropolitan region. We are one region, working in one economy, with a shared future. We need one, balanced and integrated transportation system in the metro region if we are going to attract and retain the best companies and the most talented workers. If we plan together and build together we will prosper together.

There is much work to be done but none of us should doubt the people of this state.

As Minnesota's member on the House Appropriations Committee, I will be your partner in this effort. My goal looking forward is to ensure that the people of Minnesota receive the necessary federal transportation funds to keep our state moving, our economy growing and our businesses prospering.

Our residents are paying taxes to Washington and we deserve our fair share of federal investments. We are going to start re-building America in the upcoming years and working together, we are going to be re-building Minnesota too.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to come before you today.

Thank you.

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